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SHELL GORGETS FROM MISSOURI

BY GEORGE GRANT MACCURDY

COLOR, texture, rhythm, harmony, symmetry, these are some of the playthings with which Nature beguiles her children.

That they appealed to even the infancy of the race there is abundant evidence. The esthetic sense early found expression in various ways. One of these was in articles of personal adornment or symbolic use. Ornaments of shell came into use before the close of the Paleolithic period and have ever since played an important rôle in primitive art. The reasons for this are obvious. Shellfish figure largely in the food supply; the empty shells serve as ready-made vessels, and are also easily fashioned into tools or articles of apparel. The inner walls of certain large shells offer a prepared field for incised and open work.

Disks of considerable size can be cut from the expanded portion of such shells, for example as *Busycon perversum*. Disks of this kind are provided with a pair of holes near the margin and presumably were worn suspended about the neck, hence the name gorget or *plaque pectoral*. In fact the mode of occurrence would seem to leave no doubt as to the method of wearing this ornament. We have the testimony of eye-witnesses, among them Mr C. Croswell,¹ who says that the gorget he found "lay on the breast-bone of a skeleton, with the concave or ornamental side uppermost."

The most comprehensive discussion of shell gorgets, also one of the first to be published, is that by Professor William H. Holmes,² whose classification has been quite generally followed by subsequent writers. Holmes recognized at least six groups, "distinguished by the designs engraved upon them." These are the cross, spider, scalloped disk, serpent, bird, human figure, the human face, and the frog. The group representing the human face when not per-

¹ *Trans. Acad. Sci. St. Louis*, III, 537, 1878.

² *Art in Shell of the Ancient Americans, Second Ann. Rep. Bureau Ethnology.*

forated for suspension might well have been used as a mask. Perforated examples, however, seem to have been used as true gorgets, for Mr Clarence B. Moore¹ has found such on the chest in burials from Arkansas and Mississippi.

The home of the shell gorget is in the middle and lower Mississippi valley and eastward along the Gulf coast to the Atlantic

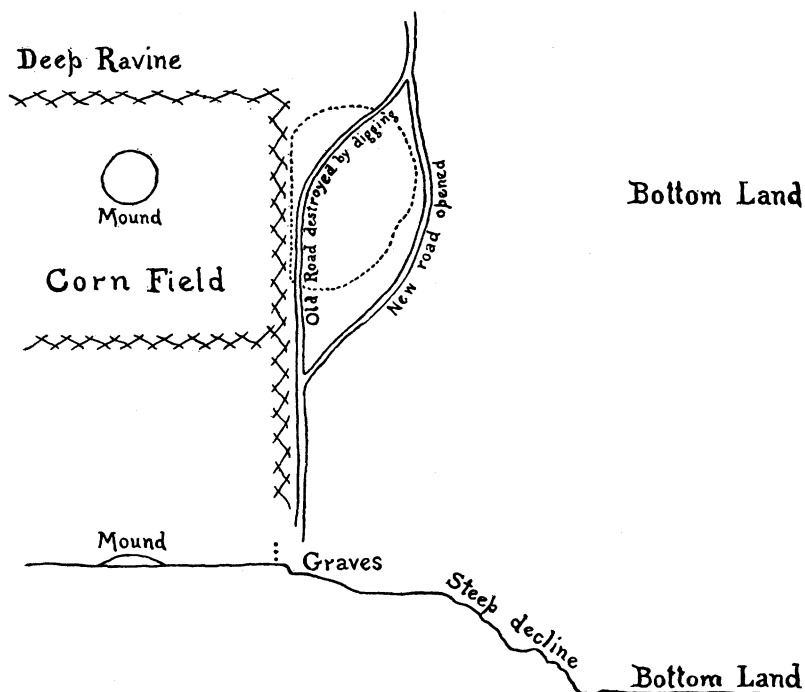


FIG. 61.—Ground-plan and profile of the site near Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. The objects were found within the dotted enclosure.

ocean (Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida), Missouri and Tennessee furnishing perhaps the finest examples. Previous writers have noted the resemblance between certain shell gorgets from Mexico (Tampico, Guerrero, Vera Cruz, and Michoacan) and those from the Mississippi valley and the Southern states.

¹ Some Aboriginal Sites on Mississippi River, *Jour. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila.*, xiv, 1911.

In 1871 Professor O. C. Marsh was so fortunate as to secure for the Yale University Museum eight shell gorgets and a fragment of another, all (with possibly one exception) from the same cemetery in Perry county, Missouri. These, together with other antiquities from this cemetery, were bought of Alfred D. Chandler, who obtained them "on the spot," and which he says "cost several days' hard labor and adventure in the woods." The locality is about four miles south of the town of Saint Marys and three miles west of the Mississippi, opposite Chester, Illinois. The cemetery is on the first gentle declivity that extends from the limestone bluffs to the steeper decline descending to the bottom lands. The graves were first laid open by the deep wagon ruts that skirted a cornfield. On the terrace near the graves and in the center of the cornfield is a mound described as being "now about one hundred feet in diameter, and perhaps eight feet high, circular in form. The farmers say it was once many feet higher, but has been worn down every year by plowing and by rain. Chandler found nothing in the mound. The accompanying ground-plan and profile (fig. 61), which evidently give a good idea of the site, are copied from a pen sketch in one of Mr Chandler's letters to Professor Marsh. The following description of the finds made at this site is also taken from this letter:

There has been but one perfect skull taken out . . . it is the skull of an adult well preserved, with all the teeth. Every attempt to get another such has failed; the bones are too far decomposed to hold together after the earth is removed. . . . Every entire skeleton was placed with its feet to the east. Many disconnected bones were found put in without order. The face was always uppermost. The bodies were sometimes in layers. The relics, etc., were always round the head. . . . Besides a large number of pots, bottles, and images, all different in shape, I have stone hatchets, copper, lead, very small arrowheads cunningly formed, large spear heads, several lower jaws, implements of bone, some fine specimens of engraved shells dipped apparently in some dye, with many other odds and ends. . . . Every article you may be sure is genuine and out of this place. I have myself excavated many, and have seen, or know beyond question that all the others have been dug up there. About a quarter of an acre of land has been upturned to get them.

Judging from the engraved shells in the Yale collection it is difficult to understand why Mr Chandler should say they had been "dipped apparently in some dye," unless he mistook the discolor-

ations of age for dye. Where the original surfaces are peeled away the shell shows white and chalky by contrast.

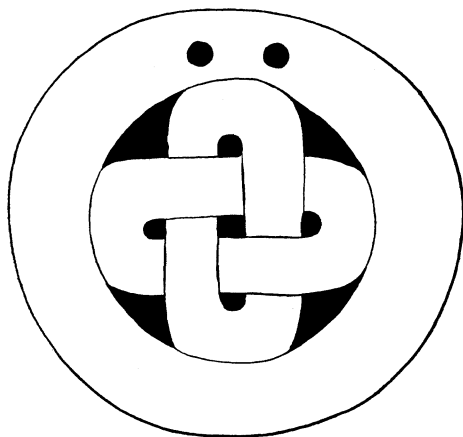


FIG. 62.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry co., Missouri. Cross design. Yale collection. (†.)

Following the classification of Holmes, the series of eight gorgets include two that might be considered as representing the cross, two the spider, one the serpent, and three the human figure. Figure 62 represents a well-preserved gorget in which the design is brought out by means of open work and incised lines. It resembles two oblong links of a chain interwoven at right angles. Beginning at the top, the right half of the vertical link passes over the upper half and under the lower half of the horizontal link; going upward the left half of the vertical link passes over the lower and under the upper half of the horizontal link. By rotating the disk 90°, the foregoing relations are exactly reproduced. The open work and the incised lines at their ends give to the links the appearance of being set in an open circular field. This design and that on a gorget¹ from Fain's Island, Tennessee (fig. 63), are variants of the same idea. In the latter the links are more angular, more closely interwoven, and not bounded by open

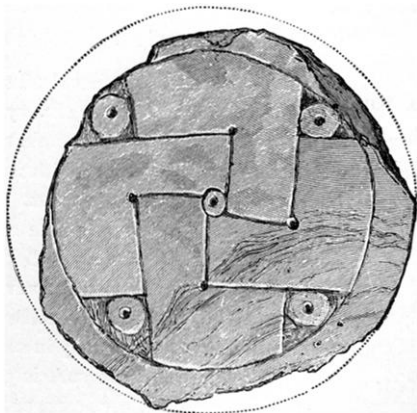


FIG. 63.—Shell gorget, Fain's Island, Tenn. Cross design. (After Holmes.)

¹ Holmes, op. cit., pl. LII, fig. 1.

work. Alternating with the arms of the cross are four annular nodes produced by *champlevé*, each with a small conical depression in the center; and at the center of the cross is a similar but smaller node.

Unfortunately the design on the gorget represented in figure 64 is fragmentary. Enough remains, however, to render restoration of the missing parts reasonably sure, because of the symmetrical character of the pattern.

In the center is a circle enclosing a cross. To another larger circle enclosing these, four straight lines are attached situated at the four points of the compass and in line with the arms of the central cross. The cruciform idea is still further extended by a series of three double terraces radiating from the four cardinal points. The tops of the four outermost terraces coincide with the inner of at least two enclosing circles.

A somewhat less elaborate example of this style is found on a shell gorget from Missouri illustrated in Mr C. C. Willoughby's "Analysis of the Decorations upon Pottery from the Mississippi Valley."¹

The significance of the cross in ancient American art has been dwelt on by various writers. Holmes believes that attempts to connect the use of the cross in prehistoric America with its use in the East "have signally failed"; and "that it occupies a place in ancient American art so intimately interwoven with conceptions peculiar to the continent that it cannot be separated from them." Among historic tribes the equal-armed cross is a common symbol for

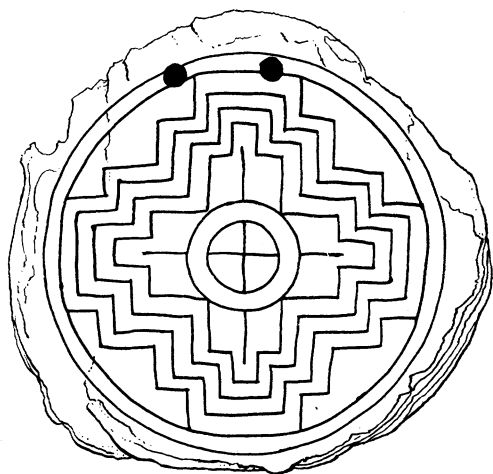


FIG. 64.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. Cross design. Yale collection. (Exact size.)

¹ *Jour. Amer. Folk-lore*, x, 1897.

the four cardinal points or the four winds. Like the swastika, with which it is sometimes associated, the cross seems to be at home everywhere. Its absence from America would call forth remark even more than its presence. It is employed as a decoration on some of the pottery from the ancient graves of Missouri south of Perry county, occurring no fewer than ten times on one of the water bottles in the Yale collection that came from Diehlstadt, Scott county, seven times painted in white on a red slip and three times spared out of the ground. On the neck are six crosses, each surrounded by a circle. On the bottom, but not centrally placed, is a rather large cross, swastika, and circle combined (fig. 65); it

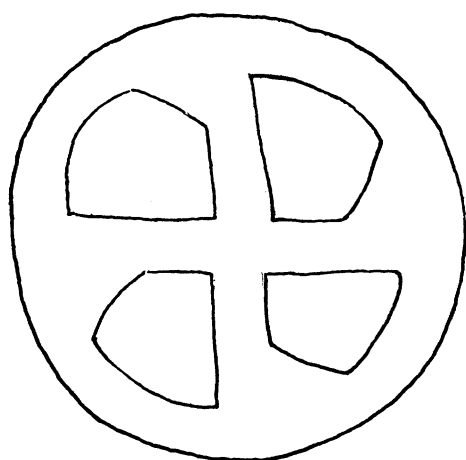


FIG. 65.—Combination cross, swastika, and circle painted on the bottom of a water bottle from Scott county, Missouri. Yale collection.

resembles the central symbol on the gorget from Saint Clair county, Illinois, seven miles from the city of Saint Louis. This gorget, which was found on the breast of a skeleton, represents a spider, the cross symbol being placed dorsally on the thorax. Similar conceptions in repoussé and open work are to be seen on several pendants of sheet copper found by Mr Clarence B. Moore at Moundville,

Alabama. The three Greek crosses on the body of this vessel are in the red color of the slip, each set in a white circular field, which in turn is surrounded by a sort of aureole suggesting the rays of the sun. The cross here might well be considered therefore as a symbol of the sun. The cross and circle surrounded by pointed rays is the central symbol on certain shell gorgets from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Florida. The cross represented in figure 66 is one of three from the body of a water bottle in the Scott county collection. It is a variant of the cross design on one of the gorgets (fig. 64).

Representations of the spider are rare in ancient American art; scarcely more than half a dozen examples of it on shell gorgets have hitherto been published. The treatment is remarkably realistic and uniform, showing the artist to be a close student of nature as well as an adept in graphic expression. That the head is invariably turned downward¹ as if the spider were suspended by its

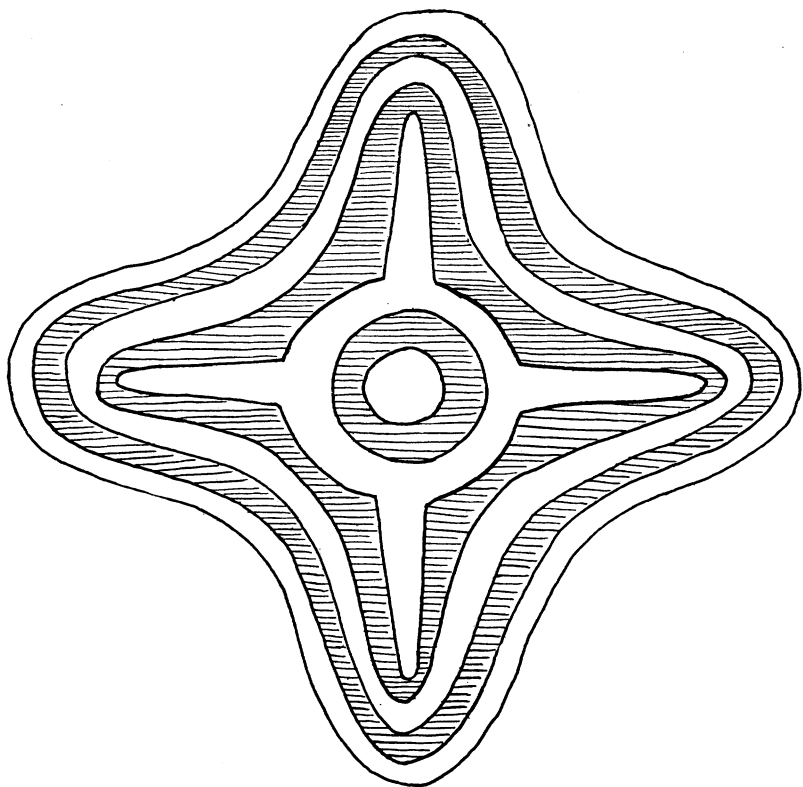


FIG. 66.—Cross design from the body of a water bottle. Diehlstadt station, Scott county, Missouri. Yale collection.

thread, is sufficient evidence to prove this to be true. According to Professor Petrunkevitch, the eminent authority on arachnids, the spider's head is always downward when the creature is in repose.

¹ The specimen from Fain's Island, Tenn., figured by Holmes, cannot with certainty be called an exception to this rule.

This is the spider's position of safety; taking it is simply obeying the law of self preservation. At the first intimation of danger, the creature drops to safety, leaving a thread by which to find its way back to the starting point; for the spider's sense of sight is probably not of the best. The artist was also exact in respect to the number, pose, and anatomy of the spider's legs. Aristotle gave to insects eight legs when they have only six. Arachnids have eight legs, but Japanese toy-makers give them only six. The ancient red man of the Mississippi valley, more observant than either, represents the spider on his shell ornaments with eight legs, the correct number.

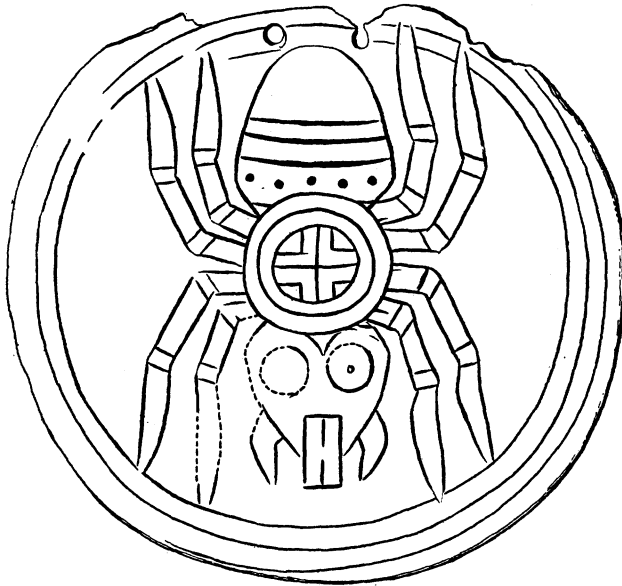


FIG. 67.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri.
Spider design. Yale collection. (Exact size.)

The pose is also correct, for all orb-weaving spiders have the legs disposed two forward and two backward on each side. The anatomy of the leg is also faithfully rendered in the series of alternating long and short segments (fig. 67). That

nearest the body represents the femur, the first short segment is the patella, the second long one is the tibia, the second short segment represents the colored zone at the joint, and the last long segment the metatarsus and tarsus combined. Mandibles, palpi, and abdomen are in general faithful to nature. Even the attachments for the dorso-ventral muscles are depicted on the abdomen by means of dots. The most pronounced deviation from nature's

model is seen in the treatment of the cephalothorax. In some species there is a suggestion of differentiation between head and thorax, but nowhere is it so marked as in the engraved effigies. In the latter, too much prominence is also given to the eyes; the spider's eyes, eight in number, are so small they were probably overlooked. The cross which sometimes actually occurs on the abdomen, the artist has for some reason placed centrally over the thorax. In *Epeira insularis*, a species common to the Mississippi valley and the United States generally, the abdominal cross is quite distinct.

In view of the artist's success in holding as it were the mirror up to nature, caution should be exercised lest the rôle of symbolism be over-emphasized. Mrs Nuttall,¹ for example, attaches much significance to the downward position of the head in spider gorgets, calling attention to the descent of Tezcatlipoca by a spider's thread. The two points she emphasizes are: that the title Tzontemoc (he who descends head foremost) "is recorded in the Codex Fuenleal immediately after the name Mictlantecuhтли"; and that "the spider is figured on the manta of Mictlantecuhтли in the B. N. MS. and is



FIG. 68.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. Spider design. Yale collection. (Exact size.)

sculptured in the centre, above his forehead, in his sculptured image." The sculptured image referred to is on the bottom of a large stone sacrificial bowl (*quauhxicalli*). The figure in the center above the forehead of Mictlantecuhтли is not the realistic spider seen on the shell gorgets; for the abdomen, the most prominent feature of the spider's anatomy, is lacking entirely, and the posture is head upward instead of head downward. It is perhaps safer to assume that the spiders engraved on gorgets are first and foremost delineations of the habits and anatomy of the spider, about which their mythological meaning, if they had any, crystallized.

¹ *Archæol. and Ethnol. Papers, Peabody Museum, Harvard Univ.*, II, 44, 1901.

The only gorget in the Yale collection that might possibly be grouped with those bearing effigies of the serpent is reproduced in figure 69. Much of the weathered crust has disappeared, leaving only faint traces of the original incised pattern, which is enclosed by a circle and which seems to consist for the greater part of three groups of approximately parallel lines. The open work confined to the central portion would no doubt add materially to the meaning of the design, which must remain somewhat of a puzzle until made clear by discoveries of better preserved examples.

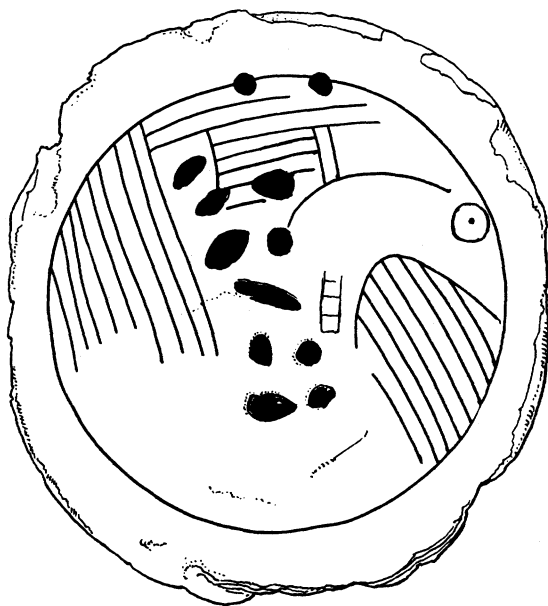


FIG. 69.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. Yale collection. (Exact size.)

The rarest of all shell gorgets, and for that matter the gems of all art in shell, are the gorgets with representations of the human figure. Three of this class are in the Yale collection. One of these (fig. 70) is perhaps the finest combination of engraving and open work that has as yet come to notice. The figure is evidently in ceremonial garb and in action. Its outlines

are accentuated by a complete cutting away of the field with the exception of the enclosing circular border nearly two centimeters wide, on which the head and extremities of the image overlap. The pose is exceedingly graceful. The weight is carried by the highly flexed right knee and the half-flexed left leg, supported by which the body is bent sharply forward. The head is seen in profile, the face being turned to the right with chin over right shoulder.

A large disk-like object, resembling the "chungkee" stone and held in the right hand, serves as a counter-poise. The left hand grasps an emblem the character of which is not wholly revealed. The position of the thumb overlapping the ends of the fingers is indicated with precision. The object held is similar to that seen in other gorgets. Above the hand it is bent inward until it seems to



FIG. 70.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. Human form. Yale collection. (Exact size.)

be partially broken; both above and below the break and again below the hand the shaft is marked by a diagonal line. To the lower end is attached a large plume marked by cross lines and short terminal longitudinal lines. In a shell gorget (from Eddy-

ville, Kentucky) in the United States National Museum the emblem is identical but turned end for end (fig. 71).



FIG. 71.—Shell gorget with engraved figure of a discus thrower, from an ancient grave near Eddyville, Kentucky. (After Holmes.)

The box-like headdress is similar to those in two large copper

figures from the Etowah mound, Georgia (fig. 72). The design enclosing the eye and reaching across the cheek in one direction and to the ear in another is seen on both shell and copper figures. The ear ornament is elaborate, extending to the elbow and represented as obeying the laws of gravitation instead of being parallel



FIG. 72.—Copper plate, Mound C, Etowah group, Georgia. (After Thruston.)

to the body axis. On the other hand the long pendant to the necklace follows stiffly the line of the body axis, one reason for this being that if allowed to assume the position called for by gravity the pendant would interfere with the unique tracery that describes almost a circle reaching from below the armpits to the knees and

resembling the skirts of a ballet dancer. The necklace and pendant are the same as those on shell and copper from the Etowah mound. There is a broad band about the waist, the free end of which hangs vertically, as might be expected, reaching the margin of the disk exactly opposite the two holes for suspension of the gorget. Below the sash and covering the right hip is a design evidently representing some article of apparel, possibly a pouch. Ornaments are worn on the arms and legs. This image and the one incised on a shell gorget from Eddyville, Kentucky (fig. 71), represent the same personage or scene, the significance of which can only be surmised.

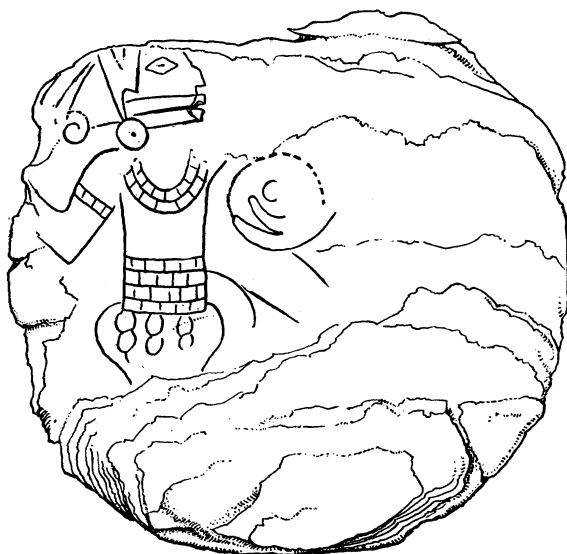


FIG. 73.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. Human form. Yale collection. ($\frac{3}{4}$ size.)

The pose is the same even to minute details, such as the disappearance of the tapering end of the pouch behind the right ankle. The scene here depicted might be some game similar to the game of *it sé wah* of the Piegan Blackfoot Indians. In modern times the Blackfeet

have used a small metal ring, wrapped with rawhide or deerskin, and cross-barred with sinew, on which various colored beads are strung.¹ In primitive times use was made of flat circular stones of convenient weight. The Yale Museum recently came into possession of such a stone disk, with the wand employed in connection with it, as a gift from Dr George Bird Grinnell. The stone had come down through many generations to chief Three Suns, of

¹ Culin in *Twenty-fourth Ann. Rep. Bur. Amer. Ethnol.*, figs. 577, 583.

the Blackfoot reservation, Montana. Both were given by the wife of Three Suns to Dr Grinnell in 1898. The Piegan stone disk is about the same size as the disks represented in the shell gorgets from Saint Marys and Eddyville.

One other shell gorget in the Yale collection (fig. 73) depicts a like scene. Here, however, the head is turned so as to bring the



FIG. 74.—Shell gorget, New Madrid county, Missouri. (After Thruston.)

chin over the left shoulder; the discus is held in the left hand, and the wand, if any, in the right. The lower part of the face is marked by straight lines drawn from the mouth to the ear, as is the case in the specimen from Eddyville, Kentucky. These lines probably represent tattoo marks, or perhaps the beak of an eagle which is

much more clearly indicated in the copper figures and an engraved shell from the Etowah mound where the attributes of the eagle are indicated not only by a mask but also by outspread wings and tail. Attention has already been called to certain articles of apparel or ornament worn in common by these images on both shell and copper.

A shell gorget from New Madrid county, Missouri, furnishes another example of the mythical creature who is evidently something more than a mere player of games (fig. 74). The posture is the same as in the Perry county and the Eddyville (Ky.) specimens. The right hand however holds what might be intended for a toma-

hawk instead of the discus; while something resembling the latter appears as a breast ornament. Back of the right arm is an emblem that occurs on the Etowah effigies in copper. The headdress and braid of hair also recall Etowah. In view of these analogies one is justified in regarding the long curved proboscis as an exaggeration of the eagle's beak.



FIG. 75.—Shell gorget, McMahon mound, Sevierville, Tennessee. (After Holmes.)

Eagle attributes are the dominant feature in a shell gorget from MacMahon Mound, Sevierville, Tenn., which according to Holmes "must certainly be regarded as the highest example of aboriginal art ever found north of Mexico." Less than two-thirds of the design has been preserved, but being bilaterally symmetrical, the missing parts have been restored (fig. 75). Two beings, human except for eagle claws and wings, are contending for supremacy.

Moore recently found at Moundville, Alabama, an interesting shell gorget on which is engraved a human head with eagle features (fig. 76); also one in which the design represents a human form on



COPPER PLATE FROM MALDEN, DUNKLIN COUNTY, MISSOURI. WULFING COLLECTION.
(AFTER FOWKE)

all fours. The customary headdress and the pouch at the hip are present. The hands seem to be armed with eagle claws.

Avian characters are dominant in the figures¹ on copper recently found in Dunklin county, Missouri; in fact they completely mask the human figure in all save one of the specimens. In this (pl. xx) the human features are quite distinct, especially the face, ear, and hair; ear ornaments and collarette are also conspicuous. The wings are folded, the feathers being represented in a rather simple yet telling fashion. The claws are those of the eagle, but the beak is not so characteristic, suggesting the turkey as much as anything else.

In some respects the most remarkable of all the shell gorgets is that reproduced in fig. 77. The diameter is about 12.5 centimeters (5 inches); there are no



FIG. 76.—Shell gorget from Moundville, Alabama.
(After Moore.)

concentric circles decorating the border, which however is well indicated by limitations set upon the open work. In the center is a human figure erect with arms outstretched at right angles to the body. The face is in profile, the chin being over the right shoulder. A curved line, drawn so as to include the upper jaw, mouth, chin, and a portion of the cheek and neck, gives to the other features a mask-like appearance which is further emphasized by the triple-pronged deer-horn that rises from the back of the head. The ear ornament consists of a single annular disk; the necklace of large beads and pendant is like that in the discus thrower from the same cemetery (fig. 70). The two free ends of the broad sash or belt reach to the knees in front. Each outstretched arm passes

¹ *Bull. 37, Bur. of Amer. Ethnol.*

through the figure of a star.¹ Below these and opposite the knees are two other larger stars, making four in all. The human figure is suspended, as it were, in the heavens from the two stars through which the arms pass, while arrows are being shot at it from the east and the west—one at the forehead, one at the back of the head (in line with the ear ornament), one at the left side, and two at the



FIG. 77.—Shell gorget from Saint Marys, Perry county, Missouri. Human form. Yale collection. ($\frac{3}{4}$ size.)

feet. The portion of the shell broken away and lost probably carried with it a sixth arrow aimed at the right side. The designs above and overlapping the large lower stars are bilaterally symmetrical; their fragmentary condition leaves their meaning obscure.

This gorget is full of symbolic import. The stag horn, as sug-

¹ This might represent a cross section of the conch shell.

gested to me by Mr Stansbury Hagar, might be considered as an attribute of the sky-god, and the four stars as the four quarters of the sky. The arrows are suggestive of sacrifice and might point to some such ceremony as the Skidi rite of human sacrifice described by Dorsey.¹ This ceremony is said to have been performed not yearly but only when Mars was the morning star, and when his desire to have the ceremony performed was revealed in a vision or dream. The victim is a young woman taken from an enemy's camp and dedicated to the Morning Star. In the construction of the scaffold the four directions play an important part. The maiden's hands are tied to the upper cross-bar which points to the north and south; her feet to the topmost of four lower cross-bars.

"Her blanket is removed, and a man rushes up from a hollow in the east, bearing in his hand a blazing brand with which he touches her in the groins and armpits. Another man approaches and touches her gently with a war-club in the left groin; he is followed by three other men, the first touching her with a war-club in the other groin, and the other two in the armpits. Then the man who captured the girl approaches from the east, bearing a bow and arrow which belong to what is known as the Skull bundle; he shouts a war cry and shoots the maiden in the heart. The chief priest opens the thoracic cavity of the maiden with the flint knife from the altar, and, thrusting his hand inside, besmears his face with blood. All the men, women and children press forward now and aim each to shoot an arrow into the body. The spectators circle about the scaffold, four times, then disperse."

Thus we may possibly have in the ancient shell gorgets from Missouri sidelights on two institutions that have persisted among the Plains Indians with apparently little change down to the present time, namely: The game of *it sé wah* and the Skidi Pawnee rite of human sacrifice. If this be true it affords fresh evidence of the importance of ethnology as an aid to the correct interpretation of archeology; especially when it is a question of the same or a contiguous geographic region, as in the present instance. Connecting the modern Plains culture with the ancient culture of Missouri is

¹ *Congr. internat. des Américanistes*, XV^e session, Québec, 1906.

not exactly equivalent to proving the latter to have been indigenous; it does however increase the difficulties in the way of those who would invoke Mexican influence in order to account for the symbolism on shell gorgets and copper plates from the Mississippi valley.

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